

OTHER PLEASURES: THE ATTRACTIONS OF POST-CONSUMERISM

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THERE ARE TWO main reasons, both of them accountable in one way or another to the legacy of Marxism, why socialists in the twentieth century have tended to be cautious about embracing utopian ideas. One lies in the sense that a responsible socialist politics cannot be content with moral posturing about desirable futures, but must relate its aspirations for social change to the potentials for this already immanent in the existing order of society. Here, the anti-utopian argument comes in the form of a rejection of voluntarism, and its longstanding influence on the left owes a great deal to the polemic sustained by Marx and Engels against idealist conceptions of the revolutionary process. Communism, as they explain in the much quoted passage from *The German Ideology*, is not a state of affairs to be established or an ideal to which reality will have to adjust itself, but ‘the real movement which abolishes the present state of things’, and ‘the conditions of this movement result from the premises now in existence’.¹

The second, and related, reason for socialist caution about utopianism derives from Marx’s resistance to inductive arguments about the future: his refusal to allow claims about the present character of human beings to have any bearing on what might be possible in post-capitalist society. Elements of this argument (which comes in effect to operate as a kind of veto on any blue-printing of the communist mode of existence) are to be found in *The German Ideology*, the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* and other texts. But it is given particularly forceful expression in the *Grundrisse*, where it is implied that inferences drawn from human nature as it now is offer little gauge for judging what

it can or will become, and that the future is in this sense unmeasurable by any present yardsticks:

When the limited bourgeois form is stripped away, what is wealth other than the universality of individual needs, capacities, pleasures, productive forces, etc., created through universal exchange? The full development of human mastery over the forces of nature, those of so-called nature as well as of humanity's own nature? The absolute working-out of all his creative potentialities with no presupposition other than the previous historic development, which makes this totality of development (...) the end in itself, not measured by a *predetermined* yardstick? Where he does not reproduce himself in one specificity, but produces his totality? Strives not to remain something he has become, but is in the absolute movement of becoming?²

There is a good deal to be said in support of both these types of objection to utopian speculation. Marx is right to warn against indulging in purely wishful visions of the future, and one cannot but endorse his strictures (and they could extend today to some 'unreconstructed' Marxists themselves) against those who fail to relate their conception of how things ought to be to conducive factors or potential agents of transformation in the present. One also needs to be wary of the paternalist – even totalitarian – implications of confident pronouncements on what is wrong in the present, and what needs to be done to correct it in the future. Overly rigid and detailed projections of future economic and political 'needs' and forms of human self-realization are certainly not without their dangers, and have resulted in some disastrous forms of fanaticism. A post-structuralist sensibility of the kind exercised by Derrida in his *Specters of Marx* towards what he sees as the overly ontologizing impetus of a Marxist-socialist theory has in this sense some rationale. Yet as I myself have argued in the context of a discussion of *Specters of Marx*, it is precisely in his projections of communism as a society unmeasurable by future yardsticks that Marx comes closest to the spirit of these Derridean recommendations; but also here, too, that he tends to expose most clearly the risks of exercising too many scruples about the specification of future political forms. For too little ontology can be just as dangerous as too much; and one could argue that in his failure to be more specific about the conditions of realization of a genuinely democratic and egalitarian post-capitalist order Marx left open a dangerous vacuum in the theory of communism: a vacuum that in the event came to be filled by a totalitarian form of politics.³

Moreover, ready as Marx was to rebuke the 'utopian socialists' for their lack of realism in failing to appreciate that the only possible future form of society is that already latently inscribed in the present, he failed himself to see the force of this argument in relation to his own claims about human nature. A society whose gains could not be assessed by reference to any present moral or emotional yardsticks would seem no less open to the charge of idealist projection than one envisaged in complete abstraction from already existing levels of

productivity and technical development. It is true that Marx expected human nature to be ‘purged’ and transformed in the process of revolution itself, and that the latter can have a dramatic impact on the feelings and outlook of those caught up in its making. All the same, some minimal continuity between the existing bourgeois structures of needs and moral sensibilities and those developed under communism would seem a condition of the emergence of the political will to revolution in the first place.⁴

RE-ENGAGING WITH UTOPIAN ARGUMENT

The Marxist position on utopian thinking, one may therefore argue, was never quite as coherent as some followers made out, and in the light of these limitations alone there is reason for socialists to reconsider the impact of its legacy. But there are additionally a number of more concrete and historically specific factors that might today invite a more positive conception of the political role of utopianism.

In the first place, some form of alternative, utopian vision is a prerequisite of the socialist critique, and alone renders it self-consistent. Socialists themselves will no doubt differ in their opinions about the extent to which the realization of a democratically organized, egalitarian, non-capitalist global order remains a realistic political goal. They may have different opinions, too, about whether it is possible to remain socialist in the absence of belief in the coming of a socialist order. The more orthodox Marxists will no doubt think of it as contradictory to defend a socialist form of critique without a correlative faith in the possibility of socialist progress. Others are likely to regard it as quite consistent to profess their socialism as a form of dissent from, or moral witness to, the iniquities of capitalism without sustaining any great hopes of advancing its political principles and programmes. But in either event, the vision of an alternative society is essential to the coherence of the commitment, and dispute will be over the degree to which this is ceasing now to figure as a realizable ‘utopia’ and becoming a ‘utopia’ in the more literal (and Marxist-pejorative) sense of being unrealizable – of figuring as a merely regulative ideal outside the parameters of a conceivable historical eventuation.

These reflections may strike some readers as odd, even shockingly unorthodox – which indeed in a sense they no doubt are. But they are not without their precursors in the socialist tradition, most notably in the argument of the Critical Theorists, in so far as this recognized the progressive disappearance from the political stage of the agents who might have been motivated to advance the form of social transformation to which it continued critically to aspire. For Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse, the utopian gesture towards redemption – however hopeless it might be of realization – remained crucial to the maintenance of their own critical position.⁵

Moreover, even those who today hold a similarly despairing view of the chances of the global capitalist order being replaced by some democratic-socialist mode of production will yet recognize the differential impact of

different policy options, and the need to encourage support for those more conducive to social justice and ecological sustainability. This is to work to a rather more gradual and modest agenda of political improvement than some revolutionary Marxists would think definable as 'socialist'. But it is nonetheless the most realistic option at the present time, and also the programme within whose framework a certain form of utopian projection can enter as a constructive and efficacious force for change. It is in this context that utopian thinking can figure as something more than a regulative ideal or transcendental gesture to the needed but impossible 'beyond' of the place and time of the actual. It is where a certain form of utopian blue-printing or elaboration of a new 'political imaginary' can have a shaping impact on political objectives and motivations in the present. At any rate, in what follows I want to elaborate on my sense that utopian visions are 'necessary' not only as the sublime 'other' to those insisting, Fukuyama-style, on the 'end of history'; and not only as a logical counter or implication of any socialist critique of capitalist modernity; but also as stimulants of desire, and hence as contributing to the development of new forms of political subjectivity. In support of this claim, I shall in the first instance offer some reflections on my conception of the links between desire, agency and utopian imagining.

UTOPIAN PROJECT AND THE AGENTS OF CHANGE

In matters concerning poverty, injustice and ecological devastation, it is very much easier to expose the sins and the sinners than it is to point to the means and the agents of correction. Anyone with eco-socialist sympathies will be able to list the industrial practices and modes of consumption immediately responsible for these evils, and to indicate the underlying sources of the problem in the structures, institutions, social relations and consumerist culture of the capitalist economy.

But what can contemporary, democratically committed, eco-socialists cite as the possible sources of transformation of these causes of destruction? In raising the question I am not denying the extensive global networks of socialist opposition outside the first world orbit, or the many left-leaning popular movements and non-governmental organizations campaigning around the world on issues of poverty, race, feminism and environmentalism. But it would in my opinion be foolish and wishful (not to say un-democratic) for socialists within the industrialized nations of the West to aspire to some sudden and revolutionary dismantling of the capitalist system, rather than to seek in the first instance to promote a left-wing social-democratic agenda by means of a parliamentary mandate. My question in this sense is about whether we have any grounds for supposing that pressure for this kind of agenda might over time lead to the democratization of the electoral process and the emergence of substantial support for a political party committed to a radical green programme of action.

Or, to re-pose the question in somewhat starker and more abstract terms: do we have any good reasons to suppose that a significant check will be exercised

in these societies on the processes of capitalist globalization and the ever more intensive forms of economic competition and ecological exploitation to which nation states, or alliances of states, are now committed? After all, it is only by means of their relatively high levels of consumption of planetary resources, and at the expense of the more impoverished sectors of the global community, that the affluent countries of the First World have managed hitherto to sustain their privileged status; and it is only by persuading voters of their capacity to continue to command those resources and to enhance growth rates and standards of living that their political parties, whether of the right or of the left, have hitherto managed to secure sufficient electoral support for government. Why should we suppose any willingness in the future to alter this long-established politics of national self-interest and the hierarchical structure of global resource distribution that it perpetuates?

No one could deny that there are very few signs at the present time of any imminent shift away from these growth-oriented and self-regarding political commitments. Yet one may concede this while continuing to believe that there are reasons not to despair altogether of increased support in the longer term for something closer to the eco-socialist agenda. In the first place, we may cite the very real alarm that is now felt about ecological attrition and the vast disparities of wealth and privilege that are the consequence of the successes of global capitalism. Many today are repelled by an order which allows the wealth of some 500 dollar billionaires to exceed the combined annual income of half the world's people. They are uneasy about the ways in which the pursuit of first world affluence protracts and exacerbates deprivation elsewhere. They know that continuing along the current paths of untrammelled growth and consumerism will mean ever increased exploitation of the poorer economies, and ever more fascistic policies on immigration in the richer – and some are fearful that this could lead over time to the wholesale collapse of any sense of collective human morality and solidarity. Alongside the emergence of these more general forms of anxiety, one may also point to signs of greater public concern with specific issues (the international arms trade, for example, the disposal of nuclear and other industrial waste products, agribusiness, genetic engineering and food modification) which have hitherto been regarded as the preoccupation of a minority of activists.⁶

There is, then, some fairly widespread concern to reduce global inequalities and to promote a more sustainable, more peaceful and fairer use of resources, although it would have to be admitted that had a compassionate concern for the misery and injustices incurred by the capitalist order been more predominant in the past, we would not be contending with the currently prevalent forms of social misery and ecological collapse. These motives are therefore very unlikely in themselves to issue in any substantial shift of political allegiances, or even in any very radical transformation of consumer habits.

On the other hand, there are some grounds to believe they will be reinforced in the future by growing disaffection and anxiety with the conditions obtaining

within affluent society itself. Those who are now more or less permanently unemployed, or very vulnerable in such work as they do have, to the shifting demands of a deregulated economy and its ever more 'flexible' contracts; the many victims of cultural and economic discrimination; the single mothers and other groups who are being deprived and scapegoated through the erosion of welfare services; the teachers, health workers, and others in the public services who are caught up in the aggressive commodification of their professions: all these, frequently overlapping, categories may be said despite their differences in immediate priorities to have a longer-term common interest in a more left-leaning political agenda. One might mention here, too, the politicizing impact of some of the more negative effects of the consumer society. Many forms of pleasure and convenience consumption which were previously unquestioned (for car travel, air-flight, disposable goods, instant foods, etc.) have now been compromised by alarms about their ecological side-effects, their impact on health or their anti-hedonist repercussions for the affluent life itself. Anxieties of this kind are, of course, by no means universal, and tend at present, for obvious reasons, to be largely confined to those in the middle and upper income brackets. They will also very often be experienced in conflict with other, more immediately pressing, concerns over employment security. Those who are dependent for their livelihood on the less eco-friendly forms of production and consumption will not find it so easy to be enthused about any ecologically prompted fall-off in demand for these commodities. Yet despite these countervailing influences and their partial and fluctuating impact on the enthusiasm for green measures, we can still point in recent times to higher and relatively diversified levels of public support for anti-pollution legislation, more organic modes of food production, and curbs on road building or airport extension. We are witnessing, we might argue, the emergence of a new, more contradictory structure of consumer needs whereby consumers are looking to alternative life-styles in order to escape the unpleasurable by-products of their own formerly less questioned sources of gratification. Associated with these shifts in patterns of consumption there is a growing interest in 'life politics' issues, less faith in the expertise of the 'experts', and less readiness to accept official versions of what constitutes progress and how to promote it. There is a sense – by no means universal as yet, and certainly not much articulated, but a sense all the same – that the key political issues, which are really concerned with the purposes of human activity and the quality of human happiness, are not being seriously addressed by official party politics; and that the cynicism and disaffection which is often expressed about the political process itself is symptomatic in this respect.

What are the implications of this type of analysis of the likely sources of support in the future for a programme more radical and green than anything currently on offer from the official parties of the Left? A first point to make, perhaps, is that despite the general option in favour of the market economy, the scale and nature of public anxieties about the future would seem to indicate that

there is rather little faith in the capacities of the global capitalist order to guarantee collective human welfare in the long term, or to deliver us from impending perils and crises. Indeed, one can argue that the dearth of support for a more radical green agenda at the present time has its cause not so much in any heady public enthusiasm for global capitalism, or belief in its powers to secure a just and peaceful world order, but rather in the degree of distrust and hostility felt at the present time for the forms of socialist alternative that have hitherto been experienced. The current demise of socialism should not, in this sense, be interpreted as evidence of a complete disowning of its fundamental values, or shift in the levels of potential support for the promotion of a more just and egalitarian order. It is better interpreted, in part, as an index of the level of public scepticism about the feasibility of a non-totalitarian alternative to the capitalist market, and as reflecting the fear of the disorder and personal costs that would seem associated with any move in that direction.

Given this context of fear and distrust of alternatives, it will be important for socialist economists to continue to expose the limitations of market methods of attempting to control and repair ecological damage, and to provide blueprints of the economic and political institutions that might help to ensure a more egalitarian and ecologically viable world order.⁷ It will also be important for the advocates of such policies to meet the arguments of those who insist that the deregulated market itself promises to provide the most sensitive and efficient mechanism for checking pollution and developing alternative resources and more eco-friendly technologies. But an excellent case can be made for arguing that the kinds of reform and cosmetic changes that are consistent with obedience to capitalist priorities will not be enough to protect even the more affluent societies from the impact of progressive ecological depletion, let alone ensure stability on a global scale, and that it is only if market forces are submitted to greater and more democratic political control, that we might hope ultimately to stave off ecological disaster and its potentially horrendous social consequences. What needs to be emphasized in the context of such arguments is the unique potential of such alternative forms for reconciling the cause of nature conservation with that of social justice and universal human well-being. Where capitalism will immiserate increasing numbers in the interests of sustaining the affluent lifestyle of a privileged minority, socialist measures promise to conserve nature by removing it from the grip of social exploitation. It can be argued, too, that environmental protection will be much better served by a more public and collective provision of a whole range of primary needs. It is increasingly recognized across the political spectrum that current policies on transport and energy use are not only ecologically absurd and irresponsible but counter-productive even in purely economic terms because of their impact on human health. Implicit in these forms of awareness is an understanding that the uncontrolled pursuit of private profit, and the continued expansion of the modes of consumption it encourages, are on a collision course with certain objective natural limits on growth.

At the same time, as indicated above, these appeals to reason and morality can be complemented by those addressed to a more directly hedonist self-interest, where the stress falls less on the pain and displeasure to be avoided for others and more on the enhanced forms of self-realization that a less market-driven and consumerist culture would be able to offer to individuals. Compelling arguments for radical change will thus need to dwell as much on the pleasures of consuming differently as on the sheer deprivations that will be made good by doing so. Looked at from this perspective, one might argue that the communications of the radical writer or theorist must necessarily assume a utopian aspect in the sense that they will seek to convey by all means possible (and not simply in theoretical writing) the seductions of life after consumerism.

ALTERNATIVE HEDONISMS

One way of looking at this kind of utopian task is in terms of the projection of other modes of satisfying our distinctively human demands for innovation, creativity, and self-distinction to those currently on offer. For what we call 'development', Western 'civilization' and its capitalist-consumerist culture, can in the most abstract sense be viewed as the narrowly constraining and inequalitarian structure of needs and consumption within which we have hitherto been forced to pursue cultural transcendence (the desire for more than material satisfaction) and to gratify the aspirations of what Rousseau termed *amour propre* (our emulative and competitive self-love which seeks the recognition and esteem of others). The alarm over 'ecological crisis' can, for its part, and in the most abstract sense, be viewed as the awakening to the destructive and ultimately unsustainable nature of this 'civilized' vehicle or mode of transcendence.

According to some elements within the environmental movement – some of the deep or eco-centric ecologists, for example, and those working under the Heideggerian call to 'authentic dwelling' – the solution to the 'crisis' is conceived in terms of a 'return' to nature, the restitution of some 'lost' but more 'genuine' relationship to it, or harmonious co-existence with it. Though the forms of social organization and socio-economic arrangements permitting this 'return to nature' are often pretty sketchy and under-developed in these arguments, the general implication is that it is a return to a 'simpler', less technologically reliant mode of being: restoring ecological harmony means committing ourselves to a more cyclical-reproductive and traditional way of being. We would ourselves get 'closer' to nature by learning to exist in a more 'natural' manner: a manner more akin in its immanent mode of being in nature to that of other animals. To put it very crudely and reductively, for this vein of ecological politics, if humanity is to become more eco-friendly it must become less distinctively human, less driven by its forms of *amour propre* and the quest to break with all 'natural' or presupposed limits of existence and self-expression.

This is an injunction, however, which is not only utopian in the bad 'idealist' sense of being unrealizable (except, possibly, for a few isolated communities of a kind which in fact already happily exist in the interstices of modern life); it is

also dystopian in its aspirations. For it is not so much the return to the confines of tradition, simplicity and ‘animal’ immanence to which we should aspire, but the advance beyond the limiting, partial, in many respects anti-hedonist and ecologically irresponsible forms of transcendence furnished by modernity.

As Marx already recognized in the nineteenth century, the drive of capitalism had exposed the limitations of ‘all traditional, confined, complacent, encrusted satisfactions of present needs, and reproductions of old ways of life,’ and there was no going back from that relative sophistication and disenchantment.⁸ As Marx saw, too, under the pressure of universal exchange and commodification, individuals would increasingly become, as he put it, ‘objectless’ or ‘naked in their subjectivity’: severed from the presuppositions of selfhood which came from being linked to a specific, place, community and social role, and thus no longer anything like so existentially predefined.⁹ But so long as these de-traditionalizing and dis-embedding processes remained caught up in the straightjacket of capitalist ownership and distribution, they would be bound, Marx predicted, to be experienced as alienation:

In bourgeois economics – and in the epoch of production to which it corresponds – this complete working-out of the human content appears as a complete emptying-out, this universal objectification as total alienation, and the tearing-down of all limited, one-sided aims as a sacrifice of the human end-in-itself to an entirely external end. This is why the childish world of antiquity *appears on one side as loftier*. On the other side, it really is loftier in all matters where closed shapes, forms and given limits are sought for. It is satisfaction from a limited standpoint; while the modern gives no satisfaction; or where it appears satisfied with itself, it is *vulgar*.¹⁰

Today, moreover, we are better placed than Marx to see how far, in fact, the processes of Enlightenment liberation have been perverted or distorted under the pressures of continuing commodification and its profit-oriented, shopping mall provision for need-fulfilment and self-extension. Freed though they may have been from earlier, ‘encrusted’ limits on satisfaction, for all too many this has been only to confine them either to boring, and often rather futile, forms of work or to the dreariness of a life on the dole. And to these limitations have been added the more universally applicable deprivations of contemporary existence: too little time, too little space, too little beauty and freedom from air and noise pollution, especially in the built environment where most now live. In this sense, as Horkheimer and Adorno argued some time ago now in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, industrial development, technological mastery, and the ever-increasing productivity of labour have served not to free people from the tyranny of the work ethic and its associated forms of misery and injustice, but to confirm them in an essentially ‘primitive’ dedication to toil and hedonist deprivation. ‘Nature’, which could have been the beneficiary of human civilization, has become its victim. The narrow and puritan habits of mind, the

failure of self-development, the social oppressions that marked the archaic stage of the 'struggle' against nature: much of this has in essence been carried over, albeit in altered form, into the economic structures and culture of the most developed societies of the Western Enlightenment. In the process, moreover, the gratifications afforded in compensation for the pains of a more 'primitive' existence – the 'simpler' life, an unspoiled environment, a secured place within the community – have also been sacrificed. The civilization which might have allowed us the best of both primitive 'simplicity' and modern 'complexity' has given us too little of either of those potential benefits.¹¹ One might note, too, in this connection, the more directly biological impact of this negative dialectic, where it is almost always the more impoverished and exploited victims of capitalist modernity who become further removed from the security and comforts of doing things in 'nature's way', while the latter, on the other hand, becomes the luxury of the richer and more privileged.¹²

If we are ever to unravel the dystopian web of contradictions in which the marginalized and least privileged peoples of the capitalist world are now so deeply entrammelled, a major transformation of current patterns of resource use and consumer dependency will be needed within the more affluent sectors. For us today in the West, the utopian aspiration must be to establish a *modus vivendi* which uncouples our pleasures and modes of self-expression from reliance on global exploitation, both social and environmental: which can reconcile the *ecological* and *egalitarian* needs for a more cyclical and reproductive (more 'natural' or 'immanent') mode of interaction with nature with the more distinctively *human* and *individualist* needs for continuous cultural creation and productive innovation (with the demands of transcendent being). Can we find ways of living rich, fulfilling, complex, non-repetitive, lives without social injustice and without placing too much stress on nature? Can we find ways of not 'going back to nature' but advancing to a more assertively human and ecologically benign form of future?

One of the challenges of such a project will be to disencumber the more positive political aspects of the Enlightenment – the commitment to pluralism, racial equality, democracy, gender parity, mass education, cosmopolitanism – from its altogether less emancipatory forms of economic rationality and ecological complacency. It will be to find ways to conserve the environment and to remain in some kind of ecological equilibrium while resisting any regression to the hierarchical and patriarchal cultural and social divisions that have traditionally always accompanied more reproductive and ecologically sustainable societies. Another will be to develop the means of enjoying novelty and the stimulus of 'progress' – of enhancing our lives with strange and unexpected experience – but without the spur of new material goods and without the constant recourse to ever more time-saving and space-contracting modes of transport and delivery.

In both instances, one may argue, progress can only be made through release from the current dominance of the work ethic and a move towards a more

rational division of work and leisure, and a more democratic, because more universally applicable, ratio of the one to the other in day-to-day life. In this sense, the reduction and fairer redistribution of work must be placed at the centre of the utopian political imaginary. Under the current economic dynamic, people are either being forced out of work altogether into the demoralizing dependency and penury of unemployment, or finding work only by joining the expanding group of contingent and highly flexible part-time workers without benefits or job security; or else, where they are in full-time employment, are being pressurized into ever more intensive and 'workaholic' routines. This is an allocation of work and rewards which does little to reduce economic and social divisions within the nation state. Global justice and ecological conservation will not be advanced by employment structures which depend on the continuous diversion of human material resources to wasteful and luxurious production and ever more sophisticated technological expansion within the more privileged economies; nor, with the exception of a privileged minority, will human pleasure and self-development, since neither the jobless nor the contingent workers who have the time but not the money or security, nor the employed who have the wage but all too little time, have been placed in a position seriously to enjoy rich and diverse modes of existence. On the contrary, they are all victims in differing ways of an economic imperative which is as ecologically wasteful as it is insensitive to what it is squandering in terms of human pleasure and fulfilment.

In short, economic procedures which are defended across the official left-right political divide as viable and essential to human well-being are in reality committed to an irrational and immoral division of time, labour and wealth, which many now fear could issue ultimately in social and ecological breakdown. Hence the importance the greens have rightly attached to the campaigns for the reduction of the working week without loss of income or security, and for a shift on the same basis to part-time work and job-share schemes. Hence, too, the inspiration that can be drawn from those who have centred their utopian argument around the relief from work, the extension of free time, and the severing of the supposedly indissoluble link between being in employment and enjoying reasonable conditions of existence.

Very relevant here right from the beginning were Marx's observations on the dialectic of necessary and surplus labour time in a post-capitalist society, and the extent to which this could in principle release surplus labour from embodiment in material, resource-consuming commodities and allow it to be realized in the form of idleness and free time. It is true, of course, that Marx's position on the expenditure of surplus-labour in a socialist economy was not explicitly 'green' in the sense of specifying that this would be spent either literally doing nothing or only in ecologically sustainable ways. But in a formal sense it certainly lends itself to such a development, and the utopian thinking of Herbert Marcuse, Walter Benjamin and André Gorz on the liberation from work could be cited as significant contributions to the 'greening' of historical

materialism along these lines.¹³ Of these three, however, it is only Gorz who makes any serious attempt to address the practical problems of transforming the structure of work in a modern complex industrial society. Where Marcuse is content to speculate on the role of fantasy, eroticism and play in liberating us from a repressive Reality Principle, and Benjamin opts for a Fourieresque model of work as play, Gorz more realistically – and compellingly – insists on the necessary heteronomy of much work in contemporary society.¹⁴ Indeed, not only does Gorz regard the alienation of much work done for a living within modern industrial conditions as ineliminable, he is also insistent, in his later writings, that the economic rationality of the market is the most efficient form of organization for certain areas of production.¹⁵

It may reasonably be objected, however, that in the current climate even Gorz's more pragmatic and feasible proposals on the liberation from work remain 'utopian' in view of the range and intransigence of the obstacles in the way of their realization. Certainly, it would be foolish to deny the extent of the internalization of the work ethic, and the alarm experienced by many at the prospect of a reduction in their work routines, even were this to incur no loss of remuneration. In asking whether the attitude engendered by capitalist societies to work and its rewards can be replaced by systems of work and pleasure having less ecologically and socially exploitative consequences, we are asking whether entrenched forms of monetary greed, compulsive modes of behaving, and deep-seated habits associated with class and gender divisions can, indeed, find their gratification in alternative ways of being, and this is by no means certain. Idleness may be eco-friendly, but it will also require people to find ways of enjoying it, and of breaking in the process with very engrained patterns of living.

Indeed, in a culture so dominated by the profit motive, in a culture, that is, where time is money, and accumulating money (saving time) the prime desideratum, the joys of idleness scarcely any longer count as such. Loitering, being lazy, slowing down, passing time: the negative connotation of these alternatives to working says a good deal about our current resistance to the pleasures of *not* saving time. But we may imagine that our attitudes to time expenditure would be very different in a society in which heteronomous work had been cut by a third to a half, and the great majority worked only some four hours a day, or had one out of every three weeks off work, or a month off out of every four. Individuals in such a society would be much freer to choose their hours of relative activity and relaxation, to pack their free days with the former or to hand them more fully over to the latter. With far fewer commuting into work and more staggered times of arrival and departure, the rush hour would become a thing of the past, and many more days could have a tranquil beginning, with time to read or talk or write, to exercise, to prepare and eat food, to be with children, to play an instrument, to make love. The remainder of the daytime hours could also be spent in more diverse ways than is currently possible for all but the richest and most privileged: in part they would be devoted to work,

certainly, but not so intensively as to prevent a visit to a cinema, or gallery or concert or swimming pool or other place of culture or recreation; and even then, there would still be time left over for study, for drinking with friends, for roaming around, for romancing, for sitting still, for reading, thinking, dreaming.

It is true that any such transformation of the relations of production and the organization of work would be conditional on a number of other, equally dramatic, changes of life-style and mode of consuming. It should be emphasized, too, that none of these will be achieved without some sacrifice of pleasure or convenience. But they are changes nonetheless whose hedonist gains arguably outweigh their losses, and all of which would have the great benefit of contributing to a more egalitarian and sustainable global order. One such change would be a significant reduction in the provision and consumption of time-saving commodities such as disposable goods, fast food, pre-cooked meals, and other items designed primarily to relieve the stress and burden on the harried and overworked. There would be time again to prepare fresh food, and to linger over it. There would even be time for many more to grow their own food in gardens or allotments. With more time and flexible work routines, people would also be better placed to reduce their reliance on a battery of labour-saving commodities within the private domestic unit: there could be more sharing of machinery within the locality, more communal maintenance of it, and more recourse to collective provision for chores such as laundry. Developments such as these would also have the virtue of helping to reduce isolation and boredom, particularly among the elderly and less mobile. The vastly increased free time available to people, and the shift away from highly consumerist life-styles, will also allow for an explosion of eccentricity and escape from the tyranny of profit-driven fashions and commodity conformism.

Another essential condition of the realization of the eco-socialist utopian future would be a transport revolution resulting in hugely reduced reliance on airflight and the use of the private motor car. This will involve some considerable sacrifice of speed and convenience, and requires adjustments that few show themselves currently to be very willing to make. But in exchange for travelling more slowly, there will be huge gains in safety for all forms of travel, vastly improved air quality, and massive reduction in noise pollution. There will also be much pleasure to be gained in terms of improved health and sense of well-being, since many more will become regular bike users, walkers and riders. Some motor routes will need to be retained for emergency and delivery vehicles, buses and taxis; but for the most part urban space will be reclaimed for cyclists and pedestrians, both of whom will have their own traffic-free routes and be able to proceed in a more or less carefree mode. Pavements and squares can become tree-lined, flower dense areas for strolling, and large parts of them given over to cafes and restaurants, street amusements, sporting activities, chess or other games, and open air concerts or exhibitions. Motorways and other major road systems could be converted into complex segregated bus and cycle routes (with many of the latter being covered for protection against the

weather, and enhanced by the provision of music, painting and sculpture). A fast and impeccably efficient train service, and far greater use of ships and river boats would help to cater for longer journeys. People will travel less swiftly and cover less distance for their holidays and trips abroad than currently where they can fly half way round the world for brief break. But in compensation their journey will become less harassed, and will itself constitute a pleasurable and more relaxing component of any trip they make.

Let us note, too, that quite apart from its beneficial ecological impact, a restructuring of employment allowing for more job-sharing and a proliferation of secure part-time jobs will go a long way to help resolve the tensions deriving from the dissolution of patriarchy in Western societies, and the emergence of gender as a site of contestation rather than a sphere of reproduction.¹⁶ For there is no way in which these tensions – which have followed on the feminist challenge to the gender division of labour, and the schism between ‘public’ and ‘private’ realms and their respective activities and priorities – can be satisfactorily met through back-tracking attempts to shore up and perpetuate the conventional male-female allocation of roles, status and position. Nor, however, can they be so through the ongoing commodification of the sexual and affective field associated with the nurturing and caring functions still largely performed within the family. For to proceed in that way is to consolidate new forms of elitism between those who can afford to pay for all forms of child-care and domestic servicing, and the under-class of ill-paid (and still largely female) providers of those services; it is also further to commercialize the ‘symbolic’ domain in ways that are inappropriate to its provision of love and care, and resistant to the pleasure and fulfilment it can offer. They are tensions of the transition from patriarchy which can only be more happily resolved in a society where it has become the norm for both sexes to share more equally both in outside work in the ‘public’ sphere and in child-care and domestic tasks in the ‘private’ – and that means, essentially, in a society that has revalued its expenditure of time and adjusted its conception and organization of ‘work’ accordingly.

On this basis, one can envisage the emergence of a culture of interpersonal relations that had transcended gender oppression, on the one hand, yet at the same time resisted the current drift towards a more narcissistic and self-sufficient mode of sexuality, on the other. This would be a culture in which gender parity would be able to co-exist with passionate forms of personal dependency, intense erotic engagements and enduring commitments, both hetero- and homosexual; a culture which had fought free of patriarchal repressions but without dissolving the messy and emotive but also intensely rewarding bonds that come with being a realized, fully organic, distinctively human being. In this context, personal relations are likely to become more various and less dominated by peer group conformity. One can envisage many more cross-generational friendships and relations; much more co-parenting (which places less stress on lovers, is beneficial for the children and a prime instrument in the dismantling of patriarchy).

The utopian 'erotic' I am advocating here is clearly at odds with the autotelic and rather solipsistic enjoyments of gender 'performance' and self-styling currently advocated by some feminist theorists.¹⁷ Nor does it subscribe to the fashionable celebration of cyberotic sex and the disembodied and transient enjoyments of virtual reality 'couplings'.¹⁸ On the contrary, where the flexibility and de-socializing tendencies of these new modes of sexuality will coexist very comfortably with the very similar imperatives of a work-oriented, highly competitive and anti-collectivist culture, a utopian erotic of passion, dependency and conviviality can figure as an alternative hedonism to it, and should be promoted as such.

Let it be said, however, that in wanting to counter the supposed 'utopia' of cyber-sexuality, I am not denying that there are aspects of the 'net-working society' and the shift to 'informationalism'¹⁹ that have utopian potential from an ecological, educational and hedonist point of view. As with all forms of new technology, these developments in computerization have emerged within hierarchical social and economic structures, whose marks they bear, and which they are serving now to reproduce. It is true, too, that the evidence of such studies as have been carried out on the matter indicate that computerized systems have as yet done little to cut down on the numbers still commuting to work; and that, if anything, 'face-to-face' exchanges have multiplied as a consequence of the increase in electronic communication.²⁰ So far, then, it seems the new technologies have been used to 'enhance' life in ways that are still dependent on high-speed, high-energy transportation of persons and material goods; to expand and complexify an existing structure of consumption rather than to divert desire into more eco-friendly types of gratification. All the same, the new forms of electronic communication and virtual reality interaction do, in principle, allow us to cut down on the polluting, noisy and high-energy consuming forms of transport involved in 'face-to-face' communications and material transfers in 'real' time-space. They could also allow for an unprecedentedly global and democratic exchange of information; for greatly extended public participation in policy-making and in the informal discourse networks of the public sphere; and for a proliferation of interesting and novel 'conversations'.

Included among these conversations, one would hope, will be many exchanges on utopianism itself: both concerning the extent to which utopian speculation can indeed help to shape and shift desire along the lines I have suggested; and on the more substantive issue of what is, or can be found desirable as the substitute for market-driven life-styles and patterns of work and consumption. I have here thrown out some ideas about the general framework within which affluent societies might begin to revise their thinking on pleasure and consumption and thus help to establish a more egalitarian and ecologically rational global order. But I have done so in the full knowledge that this offering is, indeed, a matter of utopian projection, and thus very vulnerable to realist objections about its unworkability; and also with the embarrassment and diffidence that comes with knowing that all such utopian adumbrations are to some

degree problematic in virtue of their very aspiration to speak for or represent the desires of others. Socialists, as suggested earlier, have not always been as sensitive as they might be to this problem of representing collective needs and interests. In defending a role for this representation in the form of speculation on hedonist alternatives, I am also very ready to acknowledge that all utopian dreaming bears the personal imprint of its dreamer, and that it is therefore always in the interests of the collective that the dreams be shared and pooled. So I would, as part of my own defence of the emancipatory role of utopian visions, include the need for an ongoing and democratic ‘conversation’ on the quality of the good life. At the same time, however, I would also assume that it is indispensable to any *socialist* conception of this that its pleasures begin with knowing that they have not come only at the cost of human misery and ecological degradation. Socialists, in other words, may diverge considerably on the details of what makes for pleasure and right living, but they will agree that all the more subtle, refined and complex pleasures will be grounded in the simpler satisfaction that comes through the elimination of suffering and exploitation. Indeed, in the end, it may even be this more negative grounding, or seemingly mere precondition of utopian existence, which reaches to the limit of a truly utopian aspiration, and constitutes its most expansive form, since it alone leaves all further potentials untold and therefore unimposed. As Adorno says, ‘perhaps the true society will grow tired of development and, out of freedom, leave possibilities unused, instead of storming under a confused compulsion to the conquest of strange stars.’²¹

NOTES

1. K. Marx, F. Engels, *The German Ideology*, ed. C. Arthur, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1970, pp. 56–7; and the theme is repeated in *The Communist Manifesto*, see especially the opening of the section on ‘Critical-Utopian Socialism and Communism’, in K. Marx, F. Engels, *Selected Works*, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1970, pp. 59–60.
2. K. Marx, *Grundrisse*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1973, p. 488. Cf. Terry Eagleton’s discussion of the unrepresentable ‘sublime’ of Marx’s communist projection, *Ideology of the Aesthetic*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1991, ch. 8.
3. ‘The Limits of Hauntology’, *Radical Philosophy*, 75, Jan–Feb 1996, pp. 26–31, esp. p. 31.
4. Cf. my development of this point in the context of a review of Steven Lukes, *Marxism and Morality*, in *New Left Review*, 163, May–June, 1987; reprinted in *Troubled Pleasures*, Verso, London, 1990, see esp. pp. 132–3.
5. It is their explicit acknowledgement of the potential idealism and self-subverting contradictions of their own critical position (or position *as* mere critics), that differentiates the Frankfurt thinkers from the post-modernist critics of the ‘disasters’ of the Enlightenment. For even though there are clear affinities between post-structuralist and early Frankfurt theorizations of the Enlightenment and subjectivity, power and desire, where the Critical Theory position differs markedly is in combining its ‘will

- to happiness' with explicit recognition of the social forms of conditioning that were rendering its aspirations ever more purely utopian; and it is this, too, which allows us to define the Critical Theory position as socialist in commitment.
6. Some more recent indications of this, to speak only of Britain, have been the level of support for the Greenpeace campaign over the disposal of the Brent Spar, the popularity of the jury's 'Not Guilty' verdict on the four women of the Swords into Ploughshares group accused of damaging an aircraft bound for Indonesia; the outcry caused by the discovery that a British company had been supplying arms to Sierra Leone; the support for the elimination policy on landmines; the BSE panic and new levels of sensitivity to food dangers which it has generated.
 7. For some examples and discussion, see P. J. Devine, *Democracy and Economic Planning: the Political Economy and the Self-Governing Society*, Polity, Cambridge, 1980; M. Albert and R. Hahnel, *Looking Forward: Participatory Economics for the Twenty-first Century*, South End Press, Boston, 1991 and *Political Economy of Participatory Economics*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1991; D. Elson, 'Market Socialism or Socialization of the Market?', *New Left Review*, no. 172, November–December 1988, pp. 3–44; E. Altvater, *The Future of the Market*, trans. P. Camiller, Verso, London, 1993.
 8. '...capital drives beyond the national barriers and prejudices as much as beyond nature worship, as well as all traditional, confined, complacent, encrusted satisfactions of present needs and reproductions of old ways of life.' *Grundrisse*, op. cit., p. 410.
 9. *Ibid*, pp. 450–6 and cf. the section on 'pre-capitalist economic modes of production', pp. 471–515, and my discussion in *On Human Needs*, Harvester Press, Brighton, 1981, pp. 125–42.
 10. *Grundrisse*, op. cit., pp. 487–8.
 11. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Verso, London, 1979, ch 1.
 12. Some recent relevant illustration of this is to be found in Donna Haraway, *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium™FemaleMan©_Meets_OncoMouse™*, Routledge, London, 1997, especially her discussion (pp. 202–12) of Nancy Scheper-Hughes, *Death without Weeping: the Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil*, University of California Press, Los Angeles, 1992.
 13. Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1966, esp Part II; for Walter Benjamin's utopian argument on work as child's-play, see Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1989, esp. pp. 261–66 and 273–80; for André Gorz's argument on work, see *Farewell to the Working Class*, Pluto, London, 1982; *Paths to Paradise: on the Liberation from Work*, Pluto, London, 1983; *Critique of Economic Reason*, Verso, London, 1989.
 14. Marx himself, we might note, also rejects any ludic model of work. Criticizing Fourier for thinking that work can be made into 'fun' or 'mere amusement', he advises us that 'really free working such as composing is at the same time the most damned seriousness, the most intense exertion.' (*Grundrisse*, op. cit., p. 611). Even this line of thinking, however, seems less than persuasive in view of the impossibility of converting most tasks performed in the contemporary labour process into anything remotely resembling the composition of music. Writing music is clearly hard work, but it is equally clear that its pressures are very different from those of

driving a train or working in a kitchen or on an assembly line, and that it is impossible for all labour to become 'free' in the sense of being as creatively intensive and rewarding as composing a symphony. Cf. my discussion in *On Human Needs*, op. cit., pp. 196–202.

15. In both *Farewell to the Working Class* and *Paths to Paradise* Gorz acknowledges the necessity of non-autonomous labour but tends to regard it as a wholly negative distraction from more fulfilling forms of 'autonomous activity'. In the subsequent development of his position (see in particular, *Critique of Economic Reason*) Gorz recognizes the importance of paid employment as a means of acquiring a social existence and identity. He also, as indicated, argues for the importance of the market in meeting a certain range of needs in contemporary industrial societies. For an exposition and critical discussion of Gorz's argument on work, see Sean Sayers, 'Gorz on Work and Liberation', *Radical Philosophy*, no. 58, Summer 1991, pp. 16–20. Sayers argues that Gorz is mistaken in his resistance to the rationalization of domestic work and welfare provision, and conservative and backward-looking in his acceptance of the intrinsic alienation of work in the 'public' sphere and in regarding the spheres of private and public as separate and irreconcilable. Finn Bowring has argued, with some justice, that this critique is based on a distorted reading of Gorz's argument, though he himself seems reluctant to recognize that there may be difficulties for women in accepting Gorz's position on caring, nurturing activities and domestic work. See his article, 'Misreading Gorz', *New Left Review*, no. 217, May–June 1996.
16. Cf. Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1996, pp. 3–4 and *The Power of Identity*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1997, ch. 4.
17. As, for example, in the argument of Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge, London and New York, 1990; *Bodies that Matter: on the Discursive Limits of Sex*, Routledge, London and New York, 1993.
18. See, for example, the articles by Mark Poster and Sadie Plant in Lisa Tickner et al (eds.), *Future Natural*, Routledge, London and New York, 1996, pp. 183–202 and pp. 203–217; cf. Joan Broadhurst Dixon and Eric J. Cassidy (eds.), *Virtual Futures: Cyberotics, Technology and Post-Human Pragmatism*, Routledge, London and New York, 1998. Cf. also the 'cyborg feminism' of Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, Routledge, London and New York, 1991.
19. I take both these terms from Manuel Castells, op. cit.
20. *Ibid.*, ch. 6, esp. pp. 394–8.
21. T. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, trans. E. N. F. Jephcott, Verso, London, 1978, p. 156. Adorno is here elaborating on his claim that, 'there is tenderness only in the coarsest demand: that no one should go hungry any more'. To quote him more fully: 'If uninhibited people are by no means the most agreeable or even the freest, a society rid of its fetters might take thought that even the forces of production are not the deepest substratum of man, but represent his historical form adapted to the production of commodities. Perhaps the true society will grow tired of development and, out of freedom, leave possibilities unused, instead of storming under a confused compulsion to the conquest of strange stars. A mankind which no longer knows want will begin to have an inkling of the delusory, futile nature of all arrangements hitherto made in order to escape want, which used wealth to produce want on a larger scale. Enjoyment itself would be affected just as its present framework is inseparable from operating, planning, having one's way, subjugating.'